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Cultural Transfer – Culture as Transfer. Conference Report – IASH Winter School 2014

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The international Winter School ‘Cultural Transfer – Culture as Transfer’, held at the castle of Münchenwiler (near Berne) between 9–15 February 2014, brought together an interdisciplinary group of doctoral and postdoctoral scholars and invited guest professors from a variety of disciplines from the humanities and the social sciences. It was the third of a series of four Winter Schools, supported by the Mercator Foundation Switzerland, that the Philosophical-Historical Faculty of the University of Bern, with the Institute of Advanced Study in the Humanities and the Social Sciences (IASH) as the leading institute, organizes between 2012–2015. Under the thematic umbrella ‘TransFormations’ and for a week, the Winter School concentrates on the analysis and shaping of local and global processes of change in its various forms and formations at the intersections of knowledge, history, culture and society. This year’s Winter School invited scholars to present and discuss their research in relation to the concept of ‘cultural transfer’.

In order to provide a common reference point, the organizers framed the overall theme as follows: In a literal sense, ‘cultural transfer’ refers to the ‘cultural mobility of objects’ (Stephen Greenblatt): the global and local flow of commodities, concepts, words, images, persons, animals, money, weapons, drugs etc. Such a pragmatic notion may be the starting point for an interdisciplinary debate on alternative theories of ‘culture’ in the humanities and social sciences. Yet, ‘cultural transfer’ implies not only the flow of things but also the fluidity of those who are engaged in their exchange. Every attempt to map landscapes of cultural transfer has to bear in mind that these landscapes are highly unstable and that places and borders, however imaginary they may be, are constantly ‘on the move’. It always was and has become increasingly difficult to identify origins and ends or even signposts and directions of cultural processes. Thus, culture

itself may be read *as* transfer (Lutz Musner), as an ongoing negotiation. It is eternally becoming rather than being. Demarcations of borders, however, are very real. Definitions of ‘cultures’ or ‘nations’ prove highly effective and ‘imaginary communities’ (Benedict Anderson) are potent political agents. This is why we cannot stop short at an abstract diagnosis of a rhizomatic game (Gilles Deleuze) of endless ‘différance’ (Jacques Derrida). The analysis of cultural transfer and culture as transfer has to take into account the dramatic situations of contact zones, the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion as well as the conditions of selection, translation, adaption or mutation within unequal power relations. Furthermore, the analysis of cultural mobility has to acknowledge that the anthropocentric notion of the human as prime mover of objects and creator of meaning might be undermined by the agency of nonhuman life (animals, bacteria, viruses), inorganic matter and the various idiosyncrasies of the objects themselves.

Within this broad conception of cultural transfer, which was critically reflected upon throughout the week, a wide range of interests was represented: geographically, the research projects span a world-wide web, from the Americas to Europe to Africa to Asia; chronologically, from the late medieval period to the present day. The 30 invited scholars came from Australia, the USA, India, Portugal, the Czech Republic, Germany and Switzerland.

The event was structured into plenary lectures and parallel workshops, each allowing ample time for discussion and the presentation of one’s individual research projects.

The four morning sessions consisted of a keynote lecture from one of the four invited guest professors, followed by a response and a discussion:

On Monday, Professor Anil Bhatti (University of New Delhi) opened the Winter School with a paper on “Similarity and Difference in a World of Movement and Migration”. Bhatti argued that we live in a world characterized by conflicts between heterogeneity (difference) and homogeneity (similarity) in fields of power and domination. This in turn has implications for the specific conditions under which cultural transfer and knowledge transfer in general are realized. Against this background Bhatti suggested that a (traditional) single emphasis on the principle of difference in (traditional) hermeneutical cultural theory and practice is inadequate for comprehending the processes of space-time transformations which characterize our contemporary world. Instead, Bhatti suggested that a strong focus on similarity would enable us to come to terms with a complex world of entanglements, shared histories and migrations. Similarity (‘Ähnlichkeit’) as a concept allows us to deal more adequately with fluid and heterogeneous, i.e. plurilingual, pluricultural and multireligious figurations in time and space, and to see the polyvalent, polycentric, overlapping and transient fields with greater clar-

ity than traditional hermeneutic approaches. In short, with the concept of similarity in mind, cultures appear as palimpsests. For Bhatti, this might be a programmatic starting point to formulate a ‘right to similarity’ (Samir Amin) and solidarity as a subversion of powerful ideologies of separation and authenticity towards the reinforcement of the kind of polycentric, pluricultural and shared histories emphasized by Marc Bloch, for example.

On Tuesday, Professor Helga Mitterbauer (University of Alberta) presented a paper on the development and transformation of the concepts of cultural transfer and ‘histoire croisée’ as formulated by Michel Espagne and Michael Werner in the mid-1980s that opposed the then widely accepted history of hegemonic influence (‘Einflußgeschichte’) and thus allowing for more complex analyses beyond bilateral comparisons between two nation states. Mitterbauer argued that these ideas should be applied to cultural formations other than nations and further developed with the help of postcolonial theories (focusing on concepts like hybridity, métissage, créolisation etc.) and actor network theory (multilateral networks, for example). Including postcolonial concepts and methodology would allow us to analyze the overlapping of global, continental, national, regional, areal and local formations and the ways in which they are infected by power modalities – then and now, including the analyzing subject him- or herself as part of such processes. In the process, the awareness increases that the concept of cultural transfer changes from place to place, discipline to discipline, and historical moment to historical moment. Mitterbauer exemplified her programmatic claims with an outline of how the journal *Wiener Wochenschrift für Politik, Volkswirtschaft, Wissenschaft und Kunst* functioned as a medium of various transfer around 1900, thus underlining the Winter School’s understanding of culture as transfer.

On Thursday, Professor Hans Peter Hahn (Goethe University Frankfurt) presented a paper on the centrality of material objects in processes of cultural transfer. According to Hahn, one of the fundamental assumptions in history builds on the idea of the ‘civilizing mission of things’: The more people own, the less they are inclined to use violence in conflicts. Another one has been among the founding assumptions in anthropology: An ethnic group has a style and objects with specific forms. While in anthropology in general the equation of object form or style with ethnic identity has been criticized for a long time, in some sub-domains like African art this is still the dominant mode of explaining things. Hahn’s paper was a critical comment on these narratives: According to Hahn, there is much less direct interaction between things and people than frequently assumed. Objects can be disregarded, they can be rejected, they can just be neglected, even ignored. In particular, when things circulate between societies, there is an unpredictable shift in meanings and relevance: Foreign things can be highly appreciated, but also misused and redefined. Thus, entanglements with things circu-

lating between societies are more complex than the paradigms of ‘adoption’ and ‘appraisal of the new’ suggest.

On Friday, Professor Marianne Sommer (University of Lucerne) presented a paper on knowledge transfer in the United States during the early twentieth century by way of the itineraries of particular objects – fossil bones and archeological artifacts. Although, according to Sommer, there is no clear origin from where knowledge circulates, because it is always already intertextual and intermedial, particular ways of passage and itineraries of its objects, the transformations they undergo and the obstacles they meet, might be reconstructed or at least observed. Sommer illustrated this point by drawing attention to the ways in which fossil bones are translated into printed words, images, and exhibits that then travel through diverse national and local contexts. Moreover, she demonstrated how, in the process, these material-semiotic objects encountered various obstacles as well as catalyzers or amplifiers of meaning.

In the afternoons, parallel sessions focussed on the impulses given by the doctoral participants and were moderated by one of the professorial or postdoctoral participants. There was a project-based session for the presentation and discussion of individual projects, a text-based session for a close reading and discussion of selected texts suggested by the participants, and a problem-based session focused on specific theoretical or methodological problems the participants are struggling with. All impulses were connected to the thematic focus of the respective session and to the overall theme of the Winter School. The topics of the various parallel sessions reached from translation and authenticity, definitions of ‘culture’, travelling art works, transfer of scientific knowledge or the mobility of material things to comparative history, identity-difference-alterity, and the role of contact zones within cultural transfer.

Readers of this journal might find the statements by participating historians on an interdisciplinary platform such as this Winter School of particular interest. A medievalist emphasized the encouragement she received by her fellow participants from literary studies throughout the week to include critical theory in her historical research as the most important starting point for all research in the humanities, especially when dealing with such concepts as ‘culture’ and ‘transfer’ that are by no means self-evident. The participant diagnosed a lack of theoretical consciousness and a general fear of anachronism in Medieval Studies that might complicate interdisciplinary exchange based on concepts such as ‘cultural transfer’. This became particularly evident during a discussion on the benefits and pitfalls of applying modern and postmodern analytical categories to historical data. Participant Martina Pranić (Charles University Prague), scholar of early modern literature, in general sees great benefit for pre-modernists engaging in interdisciplinary exchange. According to Pranić, this holds true especially in the case of

concepts such as cultural transfer that are both empirical as well as analytical terms. She argued that ‘if we take all that flux and destabilisation that ‘cultural transfer’ is supposed to be about seriously, then it also shouldn’t matter whether research is pre- or postmodern for the benefit to be reaped. Methodologies will be different, ... but we early modernists have already destabilized many of those old, clear-cut binaries, as well as notions of authorship, identity, colonialism, nation-building, etc. With our own findings in mind, engaging in interdisciplinary dialogue could open up a space for the negotiation of theoretical understanding and entice some sharing of useful research methodologies. Another advantage of such an approach is that it lessens the resistance to theory and the tendency towards departmentalisation that still prevails in early modern studies.’ Modern historian Jonas Flury (University of Bern) takes the same line by saying that ‘if history as a discipline aspires to more than just legitimizing and (re)producing social collectives such as ‘nation’, ‘country’, ‘culture’ or ‘race’, it has to engage in discussions of concepts as a means of denaturalizing the subjects and objects of its discourse. Awareness of what is said and, just as importantly, of what is *left out* by employing certain theories and concepts has to underlie any historical study that strives to be self-reflexive and make plausible truth-claims. All too often, concepts are employed without questioning the consequences of their use. Theoretical and conceptual discussion within the discipline or in an interdisciplinary framework is not useful for historians – it is indispensable.’ The organizers of the Winter School 2014 couldn’t agree more.

